



My humble thanks to New York Times Bestseller [Michael A. Stackpole](#) for inviting me to play participate in the Chain Story Project. He's assembled a multitude of talented writers (plus me) to contribute short fiction, with each of the tales delivered by raconteurs at a [Wanderers' Club](#) gathering. All of the stories are available for free online at the authors' websites, with links to and from from the central Chain Story hub at <http://chainstory.stormwolf.com/>. I highly encourage you to visit the site and browse through the wonderful assortment of speculative fiction, horror, and high adventure.

Memories of an Undead Sun

by

Jack Mangan

“Thank you, Master Juneberry, for sharing your [story](#) and your wig powder with us, here in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century. I hope you'll regale us again soon with further macabre accounts of your native era.” Stewart Bailey sat nearby on the buttoned Chesterfield couch, peering from beneath the rim of his derby hat. The cigarillo between his fingers was mostly ash, its thin tapestry of smoke drifting in the parlour air. Just shy of his mid-20s, Stewart wore a young man's beard with a young man's arrogance, his tan collared shirt parted just enough to hint at the muscle beneath. He sat up and found an ashtray for his cigarette, allowing the room's attention to shift in his direction.

“I find the drab girl from Jedediah's story to be quite brave, in her own way. This has been a common theme this evening, and is most certainly characteristic to all gentlemen and dames present; although I assume that even in this esteemed company, few are as courageous as I. . .” Bailey drained the caramel-colored drink from his glass, then paused to bare his teeth, as if biting the liquor back. “. . . Like to think I am. For - - begging the pardon of Ms. Patel and our other lady Wanderers - - what is a man if he is not brave?” The ice rattled in his empty glass as he shook it at the nearest attendant.

"And the greatest measure of valor for each of us lies in the mirrors of our pasts. What is a man, after all, but a shattered reflection of his Father's best and worst? And what are brothers and sons but splintered shards from that same glass?"

. PART I .

The low hum and spark of machinery in my oldest memory, electric whispers against the carousel's dissonant chimes. Thrill of velocity in my chest, cool wind on my face. Dad standing next to my impaled plastic horse, a steady reassurance against the circling rush.

Sometime during that same August, my big brother Harry traded bullets with the Japs on some Pacific island, fighting sandbag desperation to its final breaths. It seems impossible that these two worlds could ever have spun together around the same Sun.

Dad's knuckles scrape hard across my next recollection, scattering blood and teeth across the kitchen tiles. Small incisors and overturned beer cans skate the linoleum; tendrils of red foam swirl for the dogs to clean. Blood iron taste in my mouth. The stale beer smell poured like rain into the gutters of my fear.

But Dad wasn't always harsh, see.

Really. . . he was all I'd had, all that had me. Mother floated through my childhood like a wraith shrouded in cigarette smoke - - always around but never truly there. At least Dad was always there, when he was around. Most of his daylight hours were spent at his auto garage, followed by barstool detours through a beer bottle skyline. Anything to be anywhere but home. Harry's death had burrowed through him, leaving both of my parents hollow and lifeless inside.

There wasn't much room for me in either of my parents' empty spaces, so now they're just photos in my wallet, alongside my hometown sweetheart, Violet Grahame. I left the suburbs at seventeen to join the Wanderer's Club, sat at the plane's window and watched my childhood recede below.

During these first three years, I walked air, land, sea, and fire to places where man and earth devolve, where bushes burn, where words become insects, where vermin assemble in the shape of gods. Glittering wonders and riches I have seen, but it's mostly been a life of danger and horrors, torchlighting the darkest secrets of this reality and any other.

I'd have it no other way.

I had faced every peril with bravado and razorblade swagger, top shirt buttons opened and pomade in my forelock, letting no nightmares into my sleep and no tremors into my grip. . . Until a mission took me to Saipan, the island that had claimed my brother eighteen years before.

. PART II .

January 1962.

Professor Gould had flown us to the tropical island on his private Bloch MB.220. I mentioned nothing of Saipan's history for me when accepting the invite, and remained mum as the plane flew over the shapeless landmass, though I sat fused to the window view. I was determined to look this place in its face, to stare down the site that had stolen my brother and my youth, but it would not match my gaze. From above, its coast appeared a paradise of lush serenity, resplendent with trees and secrets. No wartime scars were visible.

We'd spelunked the ancient cavern on Gould's map, mostly survived its traps, and emerged victorious with the golden, skull-shaped idol we'd sought. Our nineteen-minus-three crew made camp on the beachside runway in the angled shade of the plane, drunk on success and our stash of bourbon. A minor cloud uprising claimed gray patches from the afternoon's blue. Gould spoke some respectful passages over three staked crosses, before a light mist scattered our mass to refuge beneath dry tent canvases.

I'd managed to set aside the ghosts of this island during our expedition, to focus on the subterranean tasks and dangers at hand, but the lull of camp and fresh deaths brought old emotions to the fore. I could barely recall my own suckthumb feelings about Harry's death, which had possibly occurred on this very beach; instead on my mind was a sawtoothed recollection of the resulting pain that had devoured my parents.

My memories of a tactile, flesh-and-blood brother were mere whispers. He existed mostly for me as a dark-eyed, black-and-white smile framed in every room, sometimes in uniform, sometimes in formal dress, haunting walls all over our home in tandem with Mother's Crucifixes. Suffering, wood-carved Christs joined his watch over each room, but They conversed primarily with Mother. The few talks I'd attempted with the One above my bed were awkward; I never knew what to say. All of our miniature Jesuses wisely elected to leave Dad alone.

I wondered bitterly what life with Dad could have been, if this war island hadn't torn my brother from his heart. What childhood could have been without the secrets and the poor lies I'd spun to explain my bruises; my personal stigmata as the suffering son.

I took my sweet whiskey burn and backed out of the camp revelry, trudged across the sloping damp rocks and sand, finding cigarillo solitude at the tide's edge, letting the surf drown out the undead voices in my thoughts. My derby's rim just about sheltered my ember from the wispy sunshower. Tiny raindrops floated around me like gnats. The MB.220 was still visible and the four tents within earshot, but far enough for me to feel alone with the sea and my whimsy. I exhaled smoke and memories with the runway to my back, letting the foam bathe my sandals. The sun dipped its toe far out as I watched, gently splashing down into the horizon.

Three fingers more of the whiskey bottle brought a welcome blur to the dusk and the evening's infant dark.

I have no idea how long I sat there; long enough for the teeming to fade down,

then up again. The moon had already crawled above the trees when the camp's distant whispers turned to screams. Shouts of alarm, pain, terror; a gun report, then another. My reverie collapsed like a wave upon the shore. I stood quickly and turned to see the matter, panic rising behind my ribcage.

Chaos writhed and collided inside the camp's torchlight perimeter. Dark forms moved amidst the stakes, wielding long swords with curved blades, each figure casting grotesque shadows on the rainslick tents. Muzzle-flashes lit the walls from inside wherever the figures entered. The canvas surfaces undulated and shook like living things; lengths of steel slashed out from inside like quills ripping free from beneath the skin.

I had no idea who they were, nor the reason for their strike. I'd thought at first that natives had ambushed the camp, but there was something unsettling about the shadows' movements, their speed and awkward grace, their unrefined skill with their curved blades. These were no ordinary island hostiles. There may have been thirty, there may have been forty, there may have been ten thousand; we were outnumbered.

I clamped my teeth on the cigarillo and charged uphill, wasting no time, no thought, no motion; though the clumped sand sapped at my haste.

The fight emerged from the ruined tents, spilling onto the open pavement around the plane. Even with my brashness and determination, the visions of slaughter before me traded in horror and disquiet. Dread gnawed at my spine, watching compatriots cut down by the swords of this sudden foe. A gunshot's distance away; I dared not fire the revolver yet, lest I hit any of my fellows. Their bullets seemed remarkably ineffective anyway, punching through marauders' flesh and bone, yet still consistently failing to drop their targets. The mist now escorted light rains.

Quinones the pilot emerged from beneath the plane in a frenzied, crouched dash and ran toward me, his eyes wide with animal fear. A swift-moving shadow ran out behind him, holding a samurai sword aloft. One of them, whoever they were. The pursuing figure closed on him. I cried out through clenched teeth, Quinones answered in kind, just before the blade's forward slice splayed open his back from shoulder to tailbone. My slaughtered colleague fell face-first to the dune.

A swollen raindrop darkened my smoke with a hiss.

I stopped short, twenty yards distant, staring beguiled at madness in human form. The shadow stepped past Quinones and stopped, katana held low, its gaze upon me. Neither of us moved.

Five seconds. Five more. Ten more. Sand fleas stormed around my column feet. I fired up a new cigarette against the mist, mostly so I could gauge the tremble in my fingers. They were still steady, of course. . . sort of. . . mostly. . . I exhaled a gray cloud of defiance, assessing my opponent.

Thin tips of rain drummed the flat, reeded cone perched over his green GI helmet. A black cloth mask obscured his face, but the eyes were Western blue. His dress was a ragtag without symmetry, combining elements of classic Japanese samurai armor, one-striped US Army fatigues, and island camouflage; the skin that shone through the fabric tears was scribbled with tattoo lines, their images indiscernible. There was no

mistaking the Rising Sun, however, enclosed in a white circle, on a ribbon over the breast pocket.

I targeted this emblem and emptied half of my gun's chamber.

His body jerked, but remained upright. The sun bled nova onto green fatigues. The swordsman looked down and laughed -- *laughed!* -- then raised the katana and charged.

I unloaded the remaining three shots, but still he . . . it . . . approached, flinching from the impacts, but otherwise entirely unfazed by the bullets. Something like fear spun up inside me. I holstered the useless gun and squared off my stance, grinding the cigarillo wrapper between my teeth as my enemy closed the distance between us.

Over the years, I'd become quite handy with a pipe wrench, and so always carried one hooked into my belt. The heavy wrought iron tool had saved my ass on a number of occasions, including one inside the gold skull cavern. This time, it would save my life.

Too fast for its human legs, the samurai GI bore down upon me, sword angling down in the same bloody crescent that had felled my colleague in the dunes. I looked up at the sword, into death's millimeter. In one fluid movement, I swung the pipe wrench from my belt for an upward parry, diverting the blade's deadly course into the sand.

The rest was brief, gory, and grotesque. I used the wrench to steal its weapon, which I then used to render my foe an inert pile on the beach.

I turned from the corpse and heaved a shuddered sigh, looking uphill at the runway carnage. The camp slaughter had only deepened. Our expedition had not come prepared for anything like this. A small fire had begun to play at the plane's rudder.

It only took thirty-seconds to reload. With the gun in my left, the sword in my right, and the heavy wrench tucked back into my belt, I charged forward into the wet fray, kicking the dead GI helmet as I went. One down, roughly thirty-nine left to go.

I was ten steps too late to save Professor Gould. He was surrounded and felled by three of the monstrous samurai. The look on his face will haunt me until my final pulse. One of them dragged Gould's body off-stage into the woods, the other two turned away to find more kills, all three working in utter silence. The attackers here were all dressed in the same mixed up uniform as the thing I'd faced on the sands. I leapt between them, beheaded one and kicked the other's knee to bend the wrong way. Even as its joint cracked, its mute, glassy expression remained unchanged. I ran off to the plane, leaving the crippled swordsman where it staggered.

Advance the film reels.

Only four of us left. I stood atop the plane's boarding steps behind its portside wing, Mike from Harlem stood with me at the narrow door, trying to purchase our escape with lead, steel, and iron. He worked his firearm; I swung the sword and the wrench, fighting for a chance to pull the stairway up and closed into the plane. The bizarre warriors swarmed and clawed the steps to get inside at us. They fought without a sound, their black masks issuing nary a grunt nor breath nor curse, regardless of

death, fall, or triumph. They pressed the aluminum stairs in eerie silence, trying to score entry into the plane, beyond Mike's Luger and my sword and pipewrench.

Brothers Henri and Michel were our only remaining crewmates on the pavement. They removed the wheelblocks, but still had to get past two dozen swordsmen to reach the MB.220's gate. We fought the enemy hard, two men at either end, but both fronts were hopelessly outnumbered. The brothers both succumbed moments apart, overcome by the tide of swords.

"I'm getting the props spinning!" Mike shouted, and was gone from my side, into the cockpit. I nodded anyway.

Just me at the gate now, one against.

The rotors woke.

"Here, don't miss," Mike said from up front. There was a glint in his voice, reflecting the fear I refused to feel. I dared a glance toward the cockpit, just in time to see him toss me a whiskey bottle stuffed with a flaming rag.

"Mike. Mike!"

Momentary distraction, parrying a katana thrust from the stairs. The bottle tossed end-over-end, hurtling toward me over rows and rows of seats. My breathing paused. I dropped my wrench and caught the thing intact, one-handed. The plane lurched forward right then, knocking me off-balance against the bulkhead, hugging the burning glass oblong against my chest.

"Mike!"

The plane's unexpected jerk dropped some of the samurai from the suddenly moving stairwell to the pavement. The remaining half-dozen-or-so clung unsteadily on as I regained my footing. This lot watched dispassionately as I wound up and hurled Mike's gift directly into them. The whiskey bottle shattered against a helmet, splashing liquid fire in all directions, soaking every man in the stairway siege, creating an avalanche of swords and bodies. Still not a syllable uttered from any of their throats.

My boots were not spared the flames' scatter; I rolled to the floor in the tight airplane aisle with a cry, desperate to kick the searing, painfully burning leather from my feet. The island's peripheral scenery accelerated faster outside the freed gate, the stairwell scraping loudly as we sped the runway.

"Get that door closed!" Mike shouted.

I was still on my ass on the floor; I'd kicked my left boot free and was working gingerly to remove the right. The scorched shoe had just fallen free beside its smoldering brother when a lone swordsman leapt gracelessly through the opening, landing on its elbows inside, legs still dangling out there on the skipping stairwell. Sparks and flames lit the entranceway behind as it forearm-crawled its full body in, achieved wavering upright and drew its katana.

I allowed myself the length of a sigh to wish I was somewhere else, anywhere else, dealing with any other trouble than this.

Then I was in a crouch, leaping up at this problem, leading with my shoulder. Thirty seconds of barefoot wrestling and blade-clicking ended with us both without swords, grappling against the wall alongside the gate. Mike had turned our wheels left

onto the L-shaped runway's only other strip, still hollering at me for results. We began to lift off from the ground, even with the stairway hanging off of the plane.

The deathly-silent man-thing had its palm pressed hard against my nose and mouth. This one's eyes were deep brown, nearly black. My weak punch attempts became gouges at its face, pulling at the mask. I finally managed to remove its hand from my cheek and free my left fist, with which I delivered a solid, wrench-reinforced uppercut to its jaw.

We both staggered apart, its mask coming completely free in my grasp as I backed into a seat across the aisle; Quinones's seat, judging by the rosary and crucifix wrapped on the armrest. The thing held precariously to the plane opening, its feet letting go, its stance dropping to a fingertip dangle as Mike banked the plane hard left.

All of the oxygen fled my lungs and my mind.

The unmasked face of my enemy belonged to Harry.

My dead brother was there before me in that bizarre mismatched uniform, his face unchanged, unaged, undecayed across all those years, like the bland image above the fireplace at home. Only this one was in color and animate, although dispassionate and mute, even at a knuckle's distance from a deadly plummet. Impossible, but there he was, with feet dangling over an unironed hillside of grass and rock.

Vertigo and gravity and something beyond reckoning pulled me down toward him and the opening. The noose of emotion tightened in my throat. In the absence of thought or certainty about any damn thing anymore, I acted. I leaped forward and clutched the thing by its wrists - - Harry's wrists. "Feel something!" I shouted into that face of straight lines. It stared back. "You took my childhood; show some emotion, damn you! Our mother only lived ten more years with the burden of your death. Our drunk father still carries it every day like a goddamned crucifix hammer, swinging it at anyone fool enough to cross him, or fool enough to be his only surviving son. Do you care? Do you hear? Do you recognize me? *You!* Are! Dead! Feel something about that! You're dead, Harry."

Something changed in its face. Harry stared back at me. "Stewart?" He said, then fell, plummeting toward a flourish of green treetops below.

I watched the body disappear into the copse behind us, reminded again but not seeing the flames that still scorched our tail. Mike finished the turn and leveled the plane out. Harry was gone. From me. Again. I slumped back into the aircraft, struggling to process what I'd just seen and done.

"Mike! We have to go back. Turn us around, we have to go back!"

I received the non-answer I'd expected, chose not to push it, not even to get up from my spot on the floor, near the opening and its chill, harsh wind. The place where I'd let him go a second time. Mike increased our altitude as much as he could, hellbent on leaving that accursed place. Through the smoke from our own hull, I watched the island recede into the distance, until all that was visible below were the waters, reefs, and other small land masses within the massive Pacific Archipelago.

It was on one of these larger islands, hundreds of miles away, where we found a ricefield to crashland the mortally wounded aircraft.



. PART III .

Cab door slam and departure in the cold. The name on the mailbox still said "Bailey", so I knew Dad still lived here.

It wasn't the persistent landmarks on my childhood street that struck me, it was the changes. Fewer trees in the Blaine yard, fewer Blaine children playing beneath them, different colored paint on Ernie Faylen's garage, different colored people in the windows of the old Bert house.

My boyhood home watched me like a suspicious old man, its interior dark, save for the TV flash, its roof snowy and shedding shingles, the white paint forehead wrinkled beneath its eaves with cracks and bitter neglect.

How did I get from the ricefield to here? It's really not important, but if you must know: Mike and I had both survived the crash uninjured. The new island turned out to be Canao, a no-account rock with a modest seaport on its eastern peninsula. We found Gould's skull artifact stowed unlocked on the plane and peddled it off to some local crimelord. A piece of that change purchased our way onto a ship bound for San Diego harbor. It was just bus, train, and cab from there; I parted ways with a grinning Mike at the Goodyear, AZ train depot.

I told you it didn't matter to the story at hand.

Pomade forelock or no, the glare of that house unnerved me. It seemed to be asking why I'd come back, and I dug through my pockets but could find no answer. I had stepped out from the cab moments before with certainty, as sure as the familiar sidewalk cracks beneath my shoes, believing my mission here primarily to see if Dad were alive or dead or undead. But now I wasn't so sure. Temporarily discouraged, I decided to check instead on other, more private memories.

I followed the line of Mrs. Davis's hedges next door, found the gap between bushes right where I'd left it and pushed through, letting the ice-tipped branches claw me as I passed through into my old backyard. Fenced only by this bramblerow and a lazy chainlink on the far side, its rearmost border faded from patio to tall grass to trees, darkening deeper into grainy woodland.

Dusk had not yet given way to night; I ventured a few steps into the open nostalgia of my old backyard. Memory baits tempted me toward their snares, but I didn't linger. The house's rear kitchen light winked on, peering like a waking eye through a dirty lens. It took only about ten paces for me to reach the cover of the shadowy trees.

This gloaming place would hide me only from the wary glances of men and houses, but it was no shield at all from the past. I pressed the familiar pathless ways through the saplings and brush into the woods, a giant amongst a forest of miniature memories. . . . Here where my toy soldiers had fought and died with machine guns, here where my cowboy hat and cap gun had helped me to slaughter scores of injuns, there where I'd hidden and cried off a swollen lip, where I'd stolen away with a secreted magazine not intended for my eyes.

The memories grew to my height as I pressed on, passing first smokes and

giggling cursewords, coming at last to a bi-trunked, spindly chestnut tree that had refused all of age's suggestions. I stepped up onto the seat of its branching U-shaped center, felt the cold bark with my fingers and eyes until I spotted my name carved above Violet's. The memory tingled through me of the August night I'd led her here and felt up the cone of her bra, her sweet lips pressed against mine. Afterward, I'd etched our names high up on this trunk, marking the date when we were both young enough to believe that anything could be forever.

I wondered if she'd remained here in this town, preserved in suburban stagnance.

Guided only by my cigarette light in the full-on darkness now, I felt my way just a bit further in, nearing what I knew should be the heart of the dense wood, but where the trees were distinctly thinner than I remembered them. The moonlight shone jaggedly through, casting a dull gray glow across the nighttime sounds.

There was indeed a large new clearing, roughly circular, with an area of about 100 feet. A cluster of dark birds erupted from the ground at my approach, scattering to vanish into the melting night. I wished now for more than the crescent moon and my freshly lit match, because nothing in this unfamiliar clearing seemed right. The frosted grass looked and felt far too well-groomed underfoot, too immaculate. None of the treachery or leafy discard of forestland; this was more like the turf of a ballfield.

There were no construction signs, fences, or equipment, nor any roads for machinery to get this deep into the woods to flatten this patch of earth so. Had the round field always been here, and I was just not remembering? Unlikely. This forest been my sanctuary and Wanderer's Club training ground, during my more hopeless days of youthful confusion. An unnatural landmark of this size wouldn't have been missed or forgotten. But who or what had made it?

I sank to a knee and began carving with the spanner, cloying then digging at the frozen ground, until soon I'd channeled a dirt trench about a foot deep. It gave beneath the surface as easily as a tilled garden. Cold soil clung to my knuckles and shirtsleeves, but still I churned. A few seconds further through the soft earth and my wrench hit something solid. The gong of impact upon metal was more foreboding than any churchbell; I felt the knell within my bones. Dread like wine swam in my cooling blood. I reached into the trench and brushed with my fingers, felt an edgeless flat plane with a smooth, solid texture like steel. It was warm to the touch, even against the winter chill, humming inaudibly to itself. Each tap echoed slightly. I dug a dozen more spots around the meadow's rim, found nothing in some places and knocked more hollow metal beneath others, until I was able to plot the buried metal object's shape.

A massive subterranean circle.

On my feet and running, trusting inarticulate memories to guide me back through the woodland ways of my younger years. Memory's betrayals only slowed me a little; soon enough I'd stealthed through the old yard and come out onto the front sidewalk again, heaving breaths of tobacco and vapor.

I stood only long enough to crush my smoke on the weeded sidewalk, hyperaware of the house windows' baleful gaze. The woodland discovery had borne a

new urgency. What could it mean? What could the clanging, heated underground circle be? I dared not ponder any further, lest I wonder again just what the hell I was doing here.

I'd deal with Dad, then either investigate the circle again, or just get to the airport and get the hell out of here again. Or maybe pay a visit first to Violet.

Approach, straightening my hat as I walked. The lock welcomed my old key and I was inside.

. PART IV .

Let's not trifle too long on acrid nostalgia.

I stood alone in the warmth, looking inward and inside. Nothing stirred except the voices on the television; no sign of my Father, or whoever I'd seen in the kitchen earlier. The air in the foyer tasted like stale cigarettes and dust.

"Dad?"

The living room was set up much like the one you recall best from your own childhood, except this place was mired in neglect. An unlit adjoining hallway led to the kitchen. A stairwell walked from the second floor on my left, the mysteries in its darkness evoked irrational fears I'd thought abandoned with childhood. Paisley couch cushions were dulled with years of grime, resting parallel to the cluttered coffee table that I'd always been forbidden to touch. Each wall had become a canvas of stains, the longest stretch still patrolled in humble filth by Harry's face and a wooden Christ. The foyer's overhead light fixture slept, dreaming of dead flies and grit on white glass. Only the television and a solitary table lamp cast any glow.

"Dad? Are you here?"

The living room furniture was situated to enshrine the television; a commercial onscreen pitched Ballantine's Ale into the echoing church-like silence. My tentative footsteps creaked on the floorboards, the thin layer of carpeting worn as thin and coarse as an army blanket. Nothing but a folded newspaper in Dad's chair where I'd expected him, plus a half-drained brown bottle and a piled, smoldering ashtray on the neighboring end table, all spotlighted beneath a yellow-shaded lamp. It was the same chair I recalled across the decades, stinking faintly of cigarettes, stale flatulence, aftershave, and of comfort. It sat regally against the front window like a throne before its television court.

"You done slick finding our spaceship in the woods, Stewart. The saucer is undetectable to most humans, but we still like to bury it, see, just to be sure." Harry smiled at me from the stairs. A moment of startled dread iced my nerves, but was quickly thawed by wordless anger. "It's good to see you standing before me, all grown-up-like from Harry's baby bro memories. I was a sleepwalker in this preserved body for decades before you slapped me awake. My comrades and I were like zombies back on that island. I didn't know who you were; I didn't know who I was."

"You're not Harry." I spoke quietly.

My brother's upright dead body, still dressed in his patchwork threads, stepped

off of the landing into the living room, walking slowly to stand before me, shaking his head. "No, I ain't. But yes I am. Sorry bro, it's complicated. Just know that Harry's mind and memories woke up in me when you said his name. I'm him, but I'm an individual within my race's massive collective mind too. I'd tell you what they call me on my homeworld, but it's got a bunch of Zs and Qs, and you'd never be able to pronounce it."

"Where's dad? This is my father's house." The words cracked on my tongue.

"I know. He's around somewhere." Harry stood nose-to-crown taller than me; he smiled. "I got a sleeper mission to fulfill on Earth, but it'll be wrapped up soon, then I'm off this wide planet. I'm ready for splitsville, you dig? Harry's body and mind are cool for sure, but I'm thirsting to drop this carbon flesh and get back to where I can hear the particles talk, to report back to my own pops and hundred million brothers back at the moonbase. My dad's sort of a Shogun for my people, see. He told a bunch of us to scram and scope this burgh out couple of decades back, re-evaluate your species for conquest, see if the collective could hear itself yet across the continents, that kind of thing. We landed first without notice on the California coast, like, and attached ourselves as anonymous passengers inside a group of artists and bohemians we found there."

"Beatniks," I said.

"Or whatever they were called back then, yeah. We just watched, no infiltrations. But I wasn't really feeling that scene, you dig, so our group split up. I took some comrades out to Saipan island to lay low and do our thing.

"But then you cats started up that great big war, see, so bodies kept coming to my island to die. Finally we figured we'd take some carcasses for a ride, see what it was like to be one of you. That was when I met Harry, just seconds after he became a lead pincushion. I think my comrades and I kind of lost ourselves in the catacombs of your little brains, you know?"

He put his hands on my shoulders, his fingertips digging in with something like affection. I backed up a step into the end table.

"You're a pretty cool cat, Stew; you carry yourself like a man should, like a samurai. You should come with me when I cruise on back to the moonbase, teach my people a thing or two. What do you think? You could help convince my old man that not every human is all violent."

I hit him.

A tight southpaw uppercut with the wrench, just like the one I'd delivered during our fight on the Bloch. Harry staggered back into the TV cabinet, the impact knocking Jesus from the wall. A dustless crucifix stenciled the wallpaper where He'd hung all those years. Onscreen, black-and-white cavalry slaughtered savage Indians.

"Couldn't get a sound out of you fuckers on Saipan; now you're in my house and you won't shut up," I said.

His counterstrike was too fast, clapping my right ear like a gunshot, tinnitus screaming to make a blood sideburn trickle. He hit my chest with his shoulder, tackling me into the chair. A framed photo of teenage Harry in a football uniform looked on from atop the dust-filmed TV cabinet.

And there I was, eighteen years after his death, wrestling with my brother in the

living room.

We wrecked the place. The yellow-shaded lamp fell to the floor, flickered a few times while pondering burnout, but remained lit. Sword wedged irretrievably into the ceiling, wrench through the television screen, pictureframes diving from the walls in splashes of broken glass, coffee table flat on the floor, its legs amputated with snaps, easy chair springs liberated through ripped cushions, shredded paisley couch upholstery, ashtray contents in a mound on the carpet, a right angle tear in said carpet. I don't know who started to smile first, but soon we were both grinning like skulls as we fought. The blood from my ear drew a southward line on my neck.

It was a great time. . . until Dad came in.

The slur in his holler reeked of booze, and sure enough, he'd come armed with a Schlitz bottle. The moment he'd bellowed some variation of "What the hell is going on in here?", my brother and I stopped short and looked at him, each with the other's collar bunched in one fist. I think Harry's expression matched mine for sheepish guilt.

Dad had always been a study in crewcut vitality. Thick framed glasses, rigid mustache like the teeth of a comb. He was built like a steam locomotive. All power, pistons, and smoke. Always highly pressurized but never able to decompress. Always chugging, but fixed to the course of the laid rails, and Heaven help any damsel tied to the tracks. His living frustration clung to him like railyard soot, through gentle evenings and drunken nights alike. The chest had sunk a bit, the mustache had grayed like a worn cow-catcher, the hairs on top had begun exodus, but otherwise, it was the same man in the same white tank top, glowering at me in much the same way he'd done ten thousand times before.

Funny thing about Fathers and the dead: they don't change.

The few seconds of awkward silence screamed to an end when the last dangling chard of front window glass let go and exploded on the floor.

Since leaving home, I've fought knuckle to fingernail with Egyptian gods, Nazi steam octopi, giant radioactive ants, Crimson Talon thugs, armies of KGB yeti, and recently, undead samurai; and always survived to drink off each of the melees. I'd honed my fighting technique to be able to stand with anything this universe or its Hells could throw at me, to counter, dodge, or parry any attack.

Yet somehow, my old man could always find a way to put me on the floor.

He stepped up and a moment later his fist hit home; my jaw and tailbone were alive with the pain of impact. From the carpet, I watched him open-hand Harry's face. This slap was much more tame, almost tender. Then those bottle-colored eyes returned their vacant fury to me.

"So they finally got tired of your loafing, wherever you drifted off to, huh? Useless, no-good. . . I'll send 'em a postcard telling them I know exactly how they feel." He staggered, nursed at his bottle. "Well your brother came back too. Harry comes home safe from The War, and this is how you treat him?"

"Dad, did you - - did you even notice that he's younger than me, that he's the same age he was when he left in 1943? Is your mind that drowned? This thing is not your son, pops, he's a . . ." I stood up. What the hell was he? "He's an evil. . . undead. . .

samurai. . . Martian."

"Like hey now - - " Harry said.

"And a beatnik," I added.

"Why do Americans call every damn thing from space a 'Martian'?" he said. "Say jack, I've only been to Mars once, and that was as a tourist. Ain't no place more dusty and boring in God's black universe, except New Mexico. Now that white coin in the sky. . . That is a lovely piece. No crowd static, no serious distances, just gorgeous expanses of quiet, where you can hear yourself and your million closest brothers think."

"You can't expect us to believe you're from some invisible moonbase. We can see up there with telescopes."

"My people have ways of avoiding your senses, brother.

"I've rowed my canoe across the Sea of Tranquility, dived its depths with my harpoon, feasted upon the flesh of harvest from beneath the fathoms, indulged in orgies of ecstasy and opium with dryads in the forests beneath the Lovelace Crater, dig. I've raided the lunar pyramids, driven locomotives across its north pole, sat on a sunlit throne while the Dark Side burned, and commanded warships in the Sea of Vapours. The Moon is not the vessel of my birth, but it was once my home, before my recon errand here. It calls me to return to its helm, and one day, man. . . one day I will."

Childhood defaults resurfaced. In spite of everything, I looked to my father now for answers, where I had none. He stared for a long moment under heavy-lidded eyes at the alien in his living room. "I'm proud of you, son," he said at last. I sighed. My Father had staggered down from any of my childish pedestals long ago; this disappointment was nothing unexpected.

The room was taken by a sudden brilliance, intense and radiant from outside, feeding in through every windowframe and pane. A shimmering sound like a high theremin note pierced the air. I could see the shine emanating from the circular underside of something big out there; a spinning metallic saucer floated between the powerlines and curbside trees above the cracked sidewalk. Its light bathed us in a dry liquid warmth, intoxicating and soporific. My feet suddenly felt as if they'd melted in my dusty shoes. Harry stood wide-eyed and grinning, his pupils dilating while my Father and I squinted into the beguiling glare. The living room and living earth became a dream, inhabited only by white light and Harry's voice.

"Time to go."

## . PART V .

A room without corners. My mind shrugged off the sleep haze, slipped into waking disquiet. I knew before my vision cleared where we'd been taken.

A leafy, mosslike scum clung in tapestries upon the saucer's interior surfaces, the ceiling, the arched pillars and the walls, even pooling along lengths of the metal floor's perimeter.

I fought to keep the screaming terror buttoned, but could feel it pushing hard against the seams. The vegetation rippled and undulated on the circular walls, alive with

quiet menace. Barren patches here and there in the overgrowth revealed oval light fixtures on polished steel. Clean chrome circuitboards appeared in a misshapen opening to my left, bulbs and switches flickering, commanding the functions of the alien machinery. A sweet ferment hung in the cabin air.

I dared not close my eyes again, dared not keep them open, dared not think, dared not retreat into numbness. Silently recited my bullshit speech about bravado and razorblade swagger.

My father was there with me, his expression betraying nothing but the customary lit-fuse anger. We were seated within a shallow circle at the room's center, hands bound behind our backs. This area sat slightly lower than the rest of the floor, rows of 1-inch white tiles beneath our feet were untouched by the alien moss. The craft was in flight; I could feel a steady, gentle vibration through the soles of my shoes. Our seats were arranged facing each other inside the recessed circle. They were ordinary, high-backed, four-legged constructs of aluminum, obviously designed for humans.

Harry's body slouched lifeless and unbound in the third chair, mouth and eyes aimed wide at the ceiling ivy, his hands and feet limp on the tiles. His dead face may have been the most terrifying sight inside the saucer.

Aside from our pathetic triangle and the moss covering the control panels, the circular room was empty.

I looked over into the baleful gaze of my father. He wasn't scanning around to take in the unfathomable, nor the inert Harry, was merely staring bloodshot. In my direction, but not at me. Through me. His arms worked at the cords on his wrists. "One thing I can't abide is having my hands bound," he said, shaking his head, looking at no one.

"Dad, this is. . . I have no idea what. . . the. . . maybe. . . maybe we should talk."

He rolled his eyes, muttered something.

The ceiling moss lurched like a sudden, rippling wave, a cloud of droplets erupting from its tiny leaves. Hundreds swelled to thousands overhead. I tried to raise my hands to shield my face, but the rope held them fast. The particle mist didn't fall on us, though; the beads moved in the air of their own accord, like gnats swarming densely in a cloud. It coalesced for a shapeless moment, then surged a tight downpour into Harry's open mouth. My gorge rose; my father rocked his seat, spitting a bile of curses, seemingly at everything in the room. A coning shaft of light shone suddenly from some source in the wall, draping itself across Harry's body. Vertical dust traffic moved thickly within the spotlight beam, seemingly emerging at either end from the pores of the flesh.

Harry's jaw snapped shut and he sat upright, looking at us both with suddenly lucid eyes. Recognition and a knowing smile. My adversary from the beach and the living room was back again.

"Welcome aboard," he said. "I've invited some molecules of my fellow Lunar-Terran legionnaires to sprinkle in with me inside Harry, you dig, so's we can talk things over. Particle-to-particle is how my race communicates, see; face-to-face like. Motes of me are dispersing into small pods on this saucer, which will carry transcripts of this right here to my fellows all over the world. It would take weeks or even months for my dust

to drift that far without those little ships. We can't translate our thoughts to radio, so I'll send some pods up to the moonbase, once the three of us have discussed a few things. Say hello to my brothers in the moss, pops. Brothers, meet my host's human family. Some of you already met Stewart, he's the cat who clicked me off of zombie channel, back on the island. I'd like us all to jam now and scribe up a groovy treaty for the Moon Shogun, to avoid interstellar war."

"Release us," I said. "I have nothing to say while I'm tied down."

I won't repeat what my father said.

"No, if I cut you loose, the moss will get you," Harry said. I looked around again at the walls, trying not to understand his threat. "So let me feed it to you straight. My race works hard against detection. You cats have seen too much, you dig, so when you meet my dad the Shogun, he'll probably say we're going to have to ace you out. Or if you're lucky, he'll order you to commit honorable seppuku. He's got a thing for Japanese history, see. But whether you live or not, you can still sacrifice yourselves and save the rest of your species. Unlike the Saturnine moss, human bodies make terrible vessels. We found that out on Saipan. Plus, this planet's too damn big for quick particle conversation. I don't really like them pods. So I vote we just bail out and enjoy our moon craters, leave you people alone down here. But my Dad. . . well, fathers of my race tend to be pretty inflexible about stuff, once they've made up their minds.

"I'm going to try to pour some logic in his coffee, but he never takes me serious. Maybe if he meets you face-to-dust, he'll call off his plans. If you can speak to him and convince him that you're peaceful-like. . . let him see some of my brothers get zombie-like trying to ride one of you, then maybe he don't send the big guns to annihilate all life on your burgh planet."

"Son, look at me," my father said. His voice was gentle, the tone I recalled from fleeting easy chair moments in childhood. Harry stopped its pacing short. "Stewart! What are you, deaf?" Dad said, his gentleness become harsh. I jumped in my chair. With his use of the word, "son", I'd assumed he was addressing Harry. I meekly returned his gaze.

"You remember that blonde you used to squeeze? Violet something? Well, she got married last year to the oldest Wainwright boy. He's a no-good, liquor-fisted drunk, hits the bourbon first, then her. She makes up stories to cover for her welts and bruises." The words came out through his permanent slur. "When this thing is all over, you go and rescue her. You hear me? Settle down, give your mom and me some grandkids to watch over, Jesus rest her nicotine soul."

Each of his words ricocheted within me.

"Harry, come over here. I want to talk to you now."

The brother thing took a few tentative steps. It was only then that I noticed the glint in Dad's fists behind his back, and understood the nonchalant twists of his arms. As Harry leaned in, my dad leapt up with a punch; a thousand pounds of old man momentum and drunken frustration into one haymaker. His long-dead son fell to its knees and elbows, blood issuing from its nose like a faucet.

"Dad!" I shouted.



"Enough of this," Harry said, beginning to rise, clutching his face. "Brothers, kill these assholes. We'll bring their corpses craterside so the Shogun can ride them himself." Dust motes still sped from the light shaft between the wall and Harry's body, conveying their incessant alien collective conversation; he'd undoubtedly spoken the words aloud for our benefit. The moment froze, Dad standing over the him, watching the walls in anticipation. I sat immobilized, fighting now at my own bonds.

Harry was up one knee now; he reached into the folds of his uniform and pulled out a pistol. Earth-made, standard Luger, by the look of it. Its barrel stared at my father.

Dad let a loose a derisive laugh. "Shouldn't Martians have Zap Guns or something?"

"Dammit, we're not from Mars and we don't carry energy weapons. I'd have my sword if it wasn't still stuck in the living room ceiling. I'm going to kill you now." But he didn't shoot.

Dad turned his back on the pistol and walked to me, his face a mask of disgust. He stepped behind me and placed his wrench into my hands. "You should always carry one of these, you know." I sighed, twisted it into the knot and set to the work of liberation. Harry's pistol was on us both, yet still it hesitated.

The ivy shook with fury now, rippling on the walls and ceiling as if storm-tossed. Tentacles ripped forth from the moss all over the room, reaching, dozens of them emerging from the vertical lawns. Some were mere fingers, others as thick and ropy as bridge cables, digits sprouting from the tips and along the lengths of these. Vines moved within the limbs like sinew and tendon, moving slowly, reaching out toward us from the walls. I sawed feverishly with the dull wrench mouth.

Harry watched us, uncertain. Dad stepped out from behind me, his stride unhindered by doubt or fear. He walked directly up to the Luger, snatched it from Harry's unsteady hands, redirected the aim at his long dead son.

"Pops?"

Five quick blasts, five eruptions of sound, five explosions of blood from Harry's chest. His arms flung upward, as he staggered back, landing hard on a spreading puddle of moss.

A cool, slick serpentine arm coiled around my throat, stretching from the nearest wall, its leafy grip turning to a living noose. I rocked, tried to kick free, but the crushing strength sapped my strength and oxygen, leaving only black spots of mortality on my sight.

Thunder.

My dad was against the tapestried wall, the gunbarrel pressed against the trunk of my killing limb. His fire chewed like lead teeth through the arm until it fell uselessly from the wall.

I pulled in a deep breath. Bloody Harry stood up again, his face contorted in fury.

"Get the old man, you dig? Leave the kid brother unless he acts up."

Dad wrecked a few more arms before the Luger merely clicked in his hands. His knuckles scraped hard across an encroaching vine, knocking it limp to the floor. Amidst the dread and fear and frustration with my stubborn bonds, I watched with something

like pride. He turned to the control panel against his wall and began flipping switches and turning dials at random. "Don't touch that!" Harry said angrily. Some actions had no obvious results, others caused the lights to change or the engines to shriek. One switch caused panels in the floor to turn translucent, giving us a view of earth below, showing us floating low at about treetop level, hovering in a slow flyover across a pond-hockey game. Vertigo panic screamed inside my chest, until I realized that the floors were indeed still there, just turned clear. No one on the ice or in the snowbanks seemed to be aware of us, low as we were overhead.

Harry leapt at my Father, just as more coiling tentacles struck.

"Dad!" I screamed, toppling my chair over in the circle, feeling my wrists very near escape. My face was against the warmth of the spacecraft's transparent tile. We were away from the hockey game now, seemingly following the course of a frozen tributary, its white surface winding immobile, deeper into the skeletal winter woods below.

Inside the cabin, my Dad shouted rage through gritted teeth. He kicked Harry back, landing him on his undead ass, just outside my circle. But even as he'd leveled the human-form attacker, a thatch of hostile green limbs wove together in front of him, a smothering spiderweb embroidery, forming a thick net to pin him against the wall.

It would be the last time I'd ever see my father. His face was full of fight and inebriated anger as the web closed in, much as I'd seen it for the majority of my childhood. He glanced a moment at me, then turned his attention again to the control panel.

The tapestry enveloped him, closing like a curtain.

The saucer crept low over another iced-over pond, this one a blank sheet with no skaters, nothing alive in any direction.

Harry remained prone, staring dumb at the turbulent wall, his mouth open with shock.

I felt the cords give. Finally. . . . about. . . . to be. . . .

Free.

My hands were loose. I stood up from the chair with a cry, holding the wrench up high like the hammer of Thor, ready to kill any goddamn thing, particle, plant, or man, that came near me.

And then the floor opened up. The sick realization of gravity surged upward from the open air beneath my feet, racing like electricity through my legs and gut. The cabin's translucent central circle had slid open like bomb bays. The three chairs and my body were in freefall from the ship, plummeting into the cold night air.

I may have screamed; I can't recall. I'd like to tell you that I casually lit a smoke during the three-second drop from the saucer, but that wouldn't be true. The ice was thin here and split easily from my impact. The frigid murk seized me, closed over me, insulating all of the world's native and alien sounds from my ears. The enveloping water was as dreamlike numb and cold as the moon, more bitter than I'd ever thought possible.

Wasting not a moment, I kicked upward against the depth's murderous chill and soon hit the lake's wintry seal. The ice sheet held against my fists, taunted me like a the bars of a cell. I walked my hands across the aquarium from below until I found an opening. I surfaced from death's mouth, pulling scorching cold air into my desperate lungs. My arms were reluctant to function at all, but complied with my efforts to pull my entire body out to the surface. The spaceship was visible overhead, but could not matter as much to me at this moment as the clawed climb to a relatively dry place.

And then I was up, my feet slipping, running, sliding on the ice. The frigid sting of the forest air stuck like a tattoo of frostbite across my exposed skin. The clear night's stars dotted a panoramic frame for the circle of silver directly overhead. The saucer had ascended slightly, but still hung low at about thirty feet. The cover of the woods would surely be inadequate, but it would have to do.

If I'd even make it that far.

Five turrets emerged from equidistant slots around the spacecraft's rim and opened fire. No laser beams, of course, just the spitting thunder of machine guns. I reflexively threw my hands overhead and continued to run in a crouch, the deadly precipitation hailing down all around me.

The ice all around split and shattered from the impact. A deluge of near misses, and suddenly I was stumbling on a keeling triangular ledge, disconnected from the rest of the surface.

I leapt from the shelf just as it pitched and submerged, only to land on another creaking fragment. I scrambled off of this just as it was shot to cubes from above. I knew with certainty that any moment, a train of bullets would drive darkness through my skull. The sure soil beneath the trees was still as distant as a mirage.

I found my way upright once more and sprinted across the treacherous ice, the squeaking of its death throes audible even over the saucer gunfire. The lake cover creaked and groaned; I had no time for terror or thought, only the next step forward. The wheel spun overhead. A jagged-rimmed chasm broke suddenly in the ice directly ahead; my feet skidded to a halt at the edge of the world. I could feel it creak below my feet. I stopped and stared up into the saucer's strafing pentagon.

And closed my eyes.

The spidery shell gave way beneath my feet and I was submerged again in the lake's watery tomb, this time without fight. I resigned to let my lungs and my heart stave off hypothermia and drowning for as many moments as they dared. Beyond that, let the great silence overtake me.

I dreamt of an underwater moon, a great silver coin, spinning down in slow motion toward the lakebed rocks, ready to land on heads or tails and decide my fate.

## . PART VI .

Consciousness swooped in again on the shore, like a great ragged crow perching upon a branch in my mind. Brave winter birds settled in icy trees in the real world

overhead. The ground a solid slab against my back, I choked water from my throat, soaking my chin and neck, feeling it instantly begin to freeze to my skin.

The saucer spun quietly overhead, its five cannons resheathed.

My head was in Harry's lap. The five bloodstains merged to one formless red shape on his chest. He'd made a seat of snow, his fingers brushed with absent affection through my hair. Two solitary tears ran a slow race from his eyes. I met his squinted gaze, unsure what to say.

"Our pops is dead, man," he said through a sob. "Total heartbreak city."

If I'd had any strength, I'd have slapped him. I hadn't allowed that gravity to touch me yet. "You saved me from the lake," I said.

"I couldn't bear it, man. Couldn't bear to let my kid brother die down here after losing Dad. So I made the others call off the shootout and dove in after you. Very nearly died myself."

I sat up through a coughing fit, wishing for the wrench, which was surely somewhere at the bottom of the lake. I lurched at him, but was too weak to do anything more than fall into him. Still, going with it, I balled his GI lapels in my trembling fists and he allowed me to topple over him into the snow. My face was inches from Harry's, his fresh tears streaming down into his hair.

"You get the fuck out of my brother's body, beatnik. Get off my planet, go up to that Shogun on the Moon and you warn him to leave the people of earth alone. And you heard Kennedy's speech last year. When American astronauts get up there, you people are either gone, or you're invisible and out of their way. You hear me?"

Harry didn't call my bluff, merely nodded.

"And my Dad- -"

Stewart grabbed the sides of my heads roughly, intimately, cutting me off. Before I could muster the strength to resist, he opened his mouth and exhaled a thousand particles of dust, coating the skin of my face. I rolled off of him, trying to scream, but choking as the aliens surged down my throat, invading through my nose and sealed lips. Terror exploded within my mind, but quickly went numb as the visions came.

I saw a great civilization, a landscape of glittering metropolis pinpoints on a map of farmlands and towns and industry, all spread across great plains of white rock. Elaborate rail lines of crystal drew a branching network of lanes from city to city, tunneling underground and through crater hillsides, threading lonesome cables across virgin dunes, terminating and rejoining at massive stations like temples, capped with spires and gold-shingled domes. Airfields bustled like hives, a constant flux of craft, saucers, and pods, some as small as marbles, others as massive as stadiums. The most grandiose jewels in this world were the castles, with the Shogun's Palace shining the brightest. It was a massive fortified pagoda of steel carved into a mountainside, its every arch, window, and surface engraved with ornate sculptures, alien images and sacred symbols, its high angled roof sloping proud and in brilliant crimson paint against the sunlight, moated first by a sentient lava, second by its great walled village of stone and brick.

No individuals were anywhere to be found, but the living moss I'd seen in the saucer carpeted every avenue, an interconnecting embroidery throughout the land, weaving the miles from sea to shining Tranquility.

Then the civilization faded, as if erased. Every place, everyone, everything; the entire colony gave way to a wasteland of lifeless white sands. Dunes and craters strewn with rocks, teeming moments before, now cast silence and emptiness in every direction.

The vision changed. View of a new city, mapped by the same stenographer, housed primarily by one-story structures with paper shoji walls sliding doors, tatami mats, thatched roofs. Feudal Japan; the aliens' first scout landings on Earth, explorers discreetly observing the indigenous culture, inhabiting the bodies and memories of fallen samurai. Lifeless sun rose through the Pacific fog, casting its sickly gaze upon incoming Portuguese trading ships.

Morning flowed like a brook into the afternoon.

Fade.

The horizon slid into sunset like a closing eyelid, and my final vision rotated into the shimmering darkness. Sightless inside the shadows of the universe. The haze soon gave way to mothballed memories, though not my own.

These had belonged to Harry.

As if on reels of film, my young father and mother smiled in stilted black-and-white, offering their infant son to their uniformed teenage boy to hold. Even as the babe cried softly for reasons its own, the brother and parents radiated joy and posed before their home for the picture. The house stood pristine and proudly groomed behind them. A thin layer of anxiety was visible beneath the top coatings of cheer and pride, but the entire image was printed on sturdy film. The photographer then repositioned his camera and asked for the teenage boy to pose alone.

Father stood sober and clean-shaven to the side in his best Sunday suit, his sharp gray fedora held before his chest. Mother held the baby in a stationary, rocking dance, and declined a cigarette. Worry occasionally swam to the surface of their faces before submerging again beneath the waves of happiness, watching the rigid pose of their son Harry on his last day at home, before departing for the Pacific theater of war.

Lightning flash of the box camera. The baby cried more loudly, drawing laughs and gentle words from both parents, who were joined momentarily by the brother. Harry looked at me.

"I'll take Dad's body with honor," he said.

And then they were gone.

I shook my head, pressing my temples hard. It throbbed as painfully as any whiskey morning-after I'd ever known. After a moment, my vision cleared upon the inert body of my brother Harry at the lake's edge. He lay dead on his back in the snow, staring upward. I followed his gaze into the clear night sky. The only circle to see now was that

great white coin, as full and brilliant and cold as steel.

The cratered lake surface reflected the moonlight, its muted radiance like an undead sun. I dragged Harry's body out on the ice until I found an opening, then interred him into the deep water's confidence.

. PART VII .

I returned to the Bailey home and fought the encroaching illness, its onset begun after the lake's bleak chill. After a few days rest, I straightened the clutter, new and old, even replaced the broken television with a brand new Zenith. I'd given myself a timeline of two weeks. I awoke each morning expecting to find Dad's body in the living room, smiling through a beer bottle greeting, with some tinfoil alien saucer on the television screen. Each sunrise, my waking stretches were answered only by an empty house.

It wasn't until the fourth day that I allowed myself to mourn the dead, honoring my father with quiet tears and a bottle from his icebox.

On the fifth, I set out to find Violet. But that is a story for another evening. . .

THE END

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